

SFGate.com

UC president's residence needs major repairs

Tanya Schevitz, Chronicle Staff Writer

Thursday, May 8, 2008



(05-07) 20:15 PDT -- The stately Kensington mansion that has been home to University of California presidents since 1969 needs some major repairs and improvements that could cost taxpayers between \$8 million and \$9 million.

According to UC officials, deferred maintenance has caught up with the 13,239-square-foot Blake House, and it can't be occupied until it is fixed up.

So the university is looking to rent incoming UC President Mark Yudof a house in the East Bay that would be used both as his residence and for entertaining - at a cost likely to top \$100,000 a year.

"There are foundation issues which lead to wall and roof issues," UC spokesman Brad Hayward said of the needed renovations. "It is an old house. If it is going to be a home for a new president, there is substantial work that needs to be done."

The manor, built in 1926, has been used by departing President Robert Dynes for the past five years. But as Yudof prepares to take over in June, university officials say the house is in no condition to continue as the official residence.

It's time to fix some of the problems, Hayward said.

The university is conducting an assessment of the needed work. A 2002 study found that about \$7 million in repairs were needed to restore it to a suitable condition, said UC spokesman Paul Schwartz.

Among the problems that study found were fractures in the foundation and a deteriorating retaining wall, as well as water leaks. Dry rot was detected in the walls and columns of the west gallery, and the house needed a new roof, new chimneys, and upgrades of its vintage plumbing and electrical systems, among other things.

The problems have gotten worse since then, said Michael Bocchicchio, UC's assistant vice president for facilities. As he pointed out dry rot in doors, cracks in the walls and water stains around the house, he noted that the soil under the house was not compacted well when the structure was built. Now, the foundation also needs to be retrofitted.

There is a long crack in the wall of the recreation room above a piano that dips to the left on the sloping floor.

"They've measured 5, 7, 8 inches of settlement. You can put a marble down at one side of the house, and it races to the other side," Bocchicchio said. "It becomes a chronic issue because what happens when the building starts to settle is you see the cracking and then you have water intrusion because joints open up at the roofline and balconies."

Thick Spanish tiles have fallen from the deteriorating roof, house manager Lupe Jimenez noted. Water trickles down the arches of the dining room and drips from the ceiling onto the dining room table.

Because Dynes was living in the house and the university's budget was tight, few repairs were done in recent years. University officials predict that the cost of the needed repairs and renovations has grown to between \$8 million and \$9 million, Schwartz said.

Blake House was donated to UC in 1962. The three-story, 10-bathroom house has sweeping views of the bay and is surrounded by 10 acres of land. Its impressive Mediterranean gardens, which are open to the public, are maintained by UC Berkeley's school of landscape architecture.

The mansion is typically staffed by one house manager. The president's private quarters totals 4,328 square feet and includes three bedrooms.

The cost of maintaining and running the estate is about \$100,000 a year, down from \$300,000 four years ago, and is paid for from an endowment set up from private donations that were given to the university to be used as it wishes. Schwartz said the savings have come from reducing the staff and doing fewer repairs.

Providing free housing for college presidents is an old tradition in academia. Universities say it's an important recruiting tool because housing is often expensive near campuses.

John Simpson of Consumer Watchdog, a Santa Monica-based nonprofit organization, said the prospect that the university would pay \$8 million or \$9 million to renovate the house is shameful.

"This is an outrageous waste of taxpayer money and comes at a time when the university needs to be thinking about serious cuts in the budget that would affect salaries for employees and student tuition fees and education," Simpson said. "This is a trivial thing they shouldn't be thinking about. This is just more of the extravagance that the UC insists on wasting its money on."

Schwartz said it is too early to say whether the university would consider selling the house.

E-mail Tanya Schevitz at tshevitz@sfgate.com.

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2008/05/08/MNJ610H1VC.DTL>

This article appeared on page **A - 19** of the San Francisco Chronicle